

# Education and Sustainable Development: challenges, responsibilities, and frames of mind

William Scott

William Scott is a Professor of Education at the University of Bath, contributing to education programmes related to environmental and sustainable development issues at doctoral, masters, and diploma/certificate levels. William Scott directs the Centre for Research in Education and the Environment and heads the Department of Education's Culture and Environment research group. He edits the journals: *Environmental Education Research*, and *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, is a member of the Research Commission of the North American Association for Environmental Education and the special interest group on ecological and environmental education of the American Educational Research Association.

## Introduction

The development of social imperatives in relation to sustainable development now has considerable momentum<sup>1</sup> and the phrase is becoming rooted in the discourse of UN agencies, national governments, business, the professions, educational institutions, and NGOs. However, Dobson<sup>2</sup> noted finding over 300 definitions, and disputation continues with rival meanings being used as competing rhetorical currencies in a market for which, and whose, worldviews will best save the planet.

Pawley<sup>3</sup> describes phrases such as sustainable development as textbook examples of political fudge-words that combine opposite positions by proposing the authority of a third, while Stables<sup>4</sup> has described them, along with phrases such as equality of opportunity and global citizenship, as paradoxical compound policy slogans. In education, currently, there is a tendency towards prepositional forms: ie, education *for* sustainable development. Although this is likely to owe something to pre-existing terminology (viz., education *for* the environment), its use may also be programmatic<sup>5</sup> for particular social purposes. As Jickling and Spork<sup>6</sup> note:

Â programmatic definitions Â go further than prescribing a particular meaning. They may be used to express particular moral or

practical choices – to advance an agenda.

In England, two main aims<sup>7</sup> are set for the school curriculum. These are:

The school curriculum should pass on enduring values and help [learners] to be responsible and caring citizens capable of contributing to a just society. It should develop their awareness and understanding of, and respect for, the environments in which they live, and secure their commitment to sustainable development at a personal, local, national and global level.

Such a fundamental social goal as sustainable development has potentially considerable implications for all aspects of society and raises question about the balance between schools' need to help implement government policies and their need to mediate them. Such policies will apply to schools as institutions, as well as to curricula, and different responsibilities apply. It will be difficult for schools to avoid the effects of some sustainable development policies (eg, legislation on waste disposal) but, even with a mandated national curriculum, schools may still choose to question the policy. This is not to argue that such policy should be opposed through the curriculum; rather it is to acknowledge the choice, and the need to exercise this both consciously and conscientiously.

## Should (education for) sustainable development be supported?

Debates in the literature,<sup>8</sup> and recent editions of *Environmental Education Research* and the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, show the growth of the sustainable development discourse and particular tendencies. Hopkins<sup>9</sup> comments that education should be seen as a primary tool in the critical endeavour of attaining a sustainable future, and the World Wildlife Fund-UK's school resource, *Lessons in Life*<sup>10</sup> notes:

We have a responsibility to help young people to understand the reasons for sustainable development, and to develop the knowledge, skills and values on which to base their future decisions and actions.

Such tendentious and determinist language is not uncommon within the literature.<sup>11</sup>

More appropriately, and more democratically perhaps, we ought to want schools to help learners develop critical understandings of sustainable development, and

help them achieve levels of critical environmental literacy<sup>12</sup> that will enable them to develop and continually adapt their own understandings and make up their own minds as to how (and whether) to change the ways that they live. It would be more ethical, and more useful, were we to acknowledge that the purpose of education in relation to sustainable development was to explore the concept and its implications, tolerating different views in this process, rather than to persuade people to accept it, whatever its implications.

But this would sit uncomfortably under an education *for* sustainable development banner where the *for* represents an instrumental view of education in the service of government in pursuit of the goal of sustainable development, and a denial of the essence of education within a liberal democracy which aims to aid learners to think for themselves.

Foster<sup>13</sup> argues that:

The relation between education and sustainability cannot be an external, still less an instrumental one. Â Learning to understand the natural world and the human place in it can only be an active process through which our sense of what counts as going with the grain of nature is continually constituted and recreated. This process cannot have its agenda set to subserve sustainability criteria which it actually makes meaningful. The policy discourse, parameters and indices of operational sustainability are heuristics, and the conditions for deploying them intelligently are at one and the same time the condition for a genuinely learning, and for a deeply sustainability, society.

Concern about the dangers of schools doing a government's bidding, is hardly new.<sup>14</sup> Neither is the notion that the responsibility which schools and teachers have should be to society, as a means of aiding its development, rather than to transient government. So what should the responsibility of schools be towards sustainable development? What are schools *for*?

## **What are Schools and Teachers for? Curriculum and Liberty**

In a 1998 on-line colloquium on the future of environmental education in a postmodern world, Sauvé<sup>15</sup> critiqued moves to reshape education such that sustainable development is seen as the ultimate goal of human development<sup>16</sup> with education as instrumental to this end, noting modernism's tendency to develop universalizing socio-political theories and socio-economic organizing principles, namely capitalism and communism, which tend to convey universal values.

Clearly, humanist thought arising from the Enlightenment has effected both capitalist and socialist development.<sup>17</sup> Equally clearly, many such modernist projects set out to constrain and shape the liberty of the individual in order to realize their social and political goals.

Of course, even in relatively liberal social democracies, there are constraints on aspects of individual liberty to protect other liberties, and this is done largely with majority compliance. Liberal democratic governments run into civil liberties difficulties when they criminalize activities which their citizens (a significant minority, at least) regard as quite proper, or act to achieve social goals which command little respect. Such approaches are common where governments have strong social agendas. In communist societies, the freedom of the individual was routinely curtailed in order to achieve revolutionary social ends, with schools being used instrumentally in this. I dwell on these issues because liberty is a word which is effectively missing from the sustainable development, education discourse, where value concepts of “justice” (both social and ecological) and “equality” (both inter- and intra-generational, and sometimes inter-species) dominate.

This notion of liberty grew out of Enlightenment thinking<sup>18</sup> and might be thought a particularly western notion, with cultural limitations, but none of this invalidates its importance as an idea, or reduces its ideological significance. Ignoring liberty lends credence to the idea that justice and equality can each be maximised at no cost to other values. However, the concepts of justice, equality and liberty are incommensurate, and to claim otherwise is to mislead.<sup>19</sup> It is a point Ross<sup>20</sup> also makes, quoting Pepper,<sup>21</sup> who promises that a future green socialism, “Â will be less prone to totalitarianism than some previous ‘socialisms’, though it will still entail sacrifice of some extant liberal ‘freedoms’ Â but this may be no bad thing.” Although this is a view which Dworkin<sup>22</sup> would not entirely share.

Liberty, of course, tends to be exercised most (but not always extended) by those with the most power in society, but herein lies the dilemma: should societies reduce available freedoms on the hypothesis that more can then share, more equally, whatever is left, (seeing equality as the dominant value), or should they extend freedoms more widely through educational, legislative, economic, and other levers (seeing liberty as the higher value)? Education has a crucial, if quite different role, in each of these strategies: between a voluntary approach, where people make their own decisions, and a compulsory approach where non-compliance is subject to legal sanction. The implications for state-funded schools in England of having a legally mandated curriculum aim of securing pupils’ “commitment to sustainable development at a personal, local, national and global level,”<sup>23</sup> are unknown.

If the purpose of education isn’t to effect some external-evolved social plan, as strongly criticized by Jensen and Schnack,<sup>24</sup> or to transmit culture through a conservative project, what is it for? Can it be just for itself? The point argued

here is that the prime focus of education is the life of the individual, involving an exposure to cultural norms, trends, and aspirations, as all curriculum is, arguably,<sup>25</sup> a selection from culture. It also involves an exploration of present-day problems without looking nostalgically to the known past, or optimistically or pessimistically to an unknown future. Rather, it embodies a rationale that sees educated and capable individuals, who possess strong social orientations and skills, as the best hope for democratically evolving solutions to both known and unknown problems, including the meanings of both democratically and evolving in this context.

I am arguing here a case for liberty as a cornerstone value. I have suggested already that the notion of liberty, as approximated to in liberal democracies may seem too western a concept to have much currency elsewhere. Parekh<sup>26</sup> has argued that this is the case for much of the developing world, and that liberal democracy as a form of government should not be regarded as universalisable. Vincent<sup>27</sup> also argues that the values and practices implicit within liberal justice theory constitute key environmental dangers, although Thomas<sup>28</sup> sees what he calls environmental liberalism within higher education as an essential step towards ecological sustainability.

Enslin<sup>29</sup> rejects Parekh's analysis, firstly, through an historical case<sup>30</sup> that pre-colonial societies in Africa enjoyed traditions of free expression, deliberation, opposition, representation, participation, and checks and balances; secondly on the pragmatic grounds that the newly emerging South Africa has chosen a liberal democratic route; and thirdly, on the more principled criteria that the transcendental qualities of liberalism bring benefits that no other system can, through its emphasis on independent and critical thought and through this, on the development of autonomy and responsibility. Enslin<sup>31</sup> says that the ultimate argument for liberalism is that for societies, and, by implication, individuals within them, to be free to choose right actions, they need the conditions of choice which liberalism seeks to establish. The sustainable development education literature tends not to make this case for liberty and choice, even from within fundamentally liberal democratic societies.

## Exploring Necessary Opportunities

These arguments support calls for choice within sustainable development education, for schools and teachers to be free to mediate government policy and educate people about sustainable development free of a priori certainties about outcomes, and unfettered by instructions about what and how to teach. An education which considers issues relating to sustainable development will touch on many issues faced by learners and their families on a daily basis. It is, of course, not always clear what appropriate actions are, and yet actions have to be taken because lives have to be led. Doing nothing is not an option, just as

schools' ignoring sustainable development will prove an unsustainable response.

So what can education do in relation to this, and what are practical ways forward? Perhaps educators have four kinds of responsibility: one, to help learners understand why the idea of sustainable development ought to be of interest to them; two, to help learners gain plural perspectives on issues from a range of cultural stances; three, to provide opportunities for an active consideration of issues through appropriate pedagogies which, for example, might begin from learners' and teachers' different interests, helping pupils understand what they are learning and its significance; and four, to encourage pupils to continue to think about what to do, individually and socially, and to keep their own and other people's options open.<sup>32</sup> Doing less than this seems neglectful; doing much more runs the risk of indoctrination. Government agencies and NGOs walk a tightrope when they attempt guidance in such matters because of their need to stimulate without prescribing, and our need to see conceptual frameworks as scaffolding to build learning around, rather than as barriers to new ideas and creativity.

The role of schools is integral to processes of thinking and learning about what might constitute appropriate futures, but its role must be limited, in this case to helping future citizens now, and as their lives evolve. Jensen and Schnack<sup>33</sup> explore such limits when they write:

Â It is not and cannot be the task of the school to solve the political problems of society. Its task is not to improve the world with the help of pupils' activities. These activities must be evaluated on the basis of their educational value and according to educational criteria.  
Â The crucial factor must be what students learn from participating in such activities Â

Such a consideration of interests seems necessary to an effective engagement with issues raised by sustainable development, and it offers some protection against forces which would shape society in particular fashions or according to pre-determined nostrums, in ways corrosive of democracy and liberty. Institutions such as schools need to exercise the responsibility that society requires of them, and be free to take up and explore with learners what sustainable development might be in ways that make contingent and contextual sense. Following Enslin,<sup>34</sup> for societies, and for freely cooperating individuals within them, to be free to choose right actions, they themselves need to embody the frames of mind and conditions of choice that enable this. If schools are to be nurseries for such choice and learning, they need encouragement and help in freely experimenting with learning.

## References

- Ayittey, G. 1992. *Africa Betrayed*. New York, St Martin's Press.
- Berlin, I. 1969. *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crick, B. 1999. "The Presuppositions of Citizenship Education." *Journal of Philosophy of Education*. Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 337 – 352.
- DfEE/QCA. 1999. *The National Curriculum: handbook for secondary teachers in England*. (key stages 3 and 4). London: Department for Education and Employment/Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.
- Dobson, A. 1996. "Environmental Sustainabilities: an analysis and a typology." *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 3.
- Dworkin, R. 2000. *Sovereign Virtue: the theory and practice of equality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Enslin, P. 1999. "Education for a Liberal Democracy: universalising a western culture." *Journal of Philosophy of Education*. Vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 175 – 186.
- Foster, J. 2001. "Education as Sustainability." *Environmental Education Research*. Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 153 – 165.
- Gough, N. 1987. "Learning with Environments: towards an ecological paradigm for education." in I. Robottom, Ed. *Environmental Education: practice and possibility*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.
- Gough, SR. 2002. "Increasing the value of the environment: a 'real options' metaphor for learning." *Environmental Education Research*. Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 61 – 72.
- Hopkins, C. 1998. "The Content of Education for Sustainable Development." in: MJ. Scoullos, Ed. *Environment and Society: education and public awareness for sustainability; Proceedings of the Thessaloniki International Conference*. Paris: Unesco.
- IUCN/UNEP/WWF. 1980. "World Conservation Strategy: living resources conservation for sustainable development." Gland, IUCN.
- — — . 1991. *Caring for the Earth: a strategy for sustainability*. Gland, IUCN.
- Jensen, B.B. And K. Schnack. 1994. *Studies in Educational Theory and Curriculum Vol. 12: Action and Action Competence as Key Concepts in Critical Pedagogy*. Copenhagen: Royal Danish School of Educational Studies.

- — — . 1997. "The Action Competence Approach in Environmental Education." *Environmental Education Research*. Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 163 – 178.
- Jickling, B. 1992. "Why I Don't Want My Children to be Educated for Sustainable Development." *Journal of Environmental Education*. Vol. 23, No. 4.
- Jickling, B. and H. Spork. 1998. "Education for the Environment: a critique." *Environmental Education Research*. Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 309 – 327.
- Knapp, D. 1998. "The Thessaloniki Declaration – the beginning of the end for environmental education." *Environmental Communicator*. Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 12 – 14.
- Lawton, D. 1978. "The End of the Secret Garden? a study in the politics of the curriculum." *Inaugural Lectures in Education (Vol 2)*. London: Frank Cass.
- Mill, JS. 1986. *On Liberty*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics.
- On-line colloquium. 1998. "The future of environmental education in a post-modern world." [http://www.ec.gc.ca/eco/education/index\\_e.htm](http://www.ec.gc.ca/eco/education/index_e.htm)
- Parekh, B. 1993. "The Cultural Particularity of Liberal Democracy." in: D Held, ed. *Prospects for democracy: north, south, east, west*. Cambridge: Polity Press. pp. 55 – 73.
- — — . 1994. Decolonising Liberalism, in: A Shtromas, ed. *The End of 'Isms'? Reflections on the fate of ideological politics after communism's collapse*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 85 – 103.
- Pawley, D. 2000. "Sustainability: a big word with little meaning." London: *Independent Newspaper*, July 11, 2000 (Review section, p. 4).
- Payne, P. 1997. "Embodiment and Environmental Education." *Environmental Education Research*. Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 133 – 154.
- Pepper, D. 1993. *Eco-Socialism: from deep ecology to social justice*. New York: Routledge.
- Ross, A. 1994. *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: nature's debt to society*. "Introduction," pp. 1 – 20. New York: Verso.
- Sauvé, L. 1999. "Environmental Education Between Modernity and Postmodernity: Searching for an Integrating Educational Framework." *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*. Vol. 4, pp. 9 – 35.
- Scheffler, I. 1960. *The Language of Education*. Springfield, IL: Charles C.



Thomas.

Scott, W.A.H. and C.R. Oulton. 1999. "Environmental Education: arguing the case for multiple approaches." *Educational Studies*. Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 119 – 125.

Smyth, J. 1998. "Environmental Education – the beginning of the end or the end of the beginning?" *Environmental Communicator*. Vol. 28, No. 4.

Stables, A.W.G. 1996. "Reading the Environment as Text: literary theory and environmental education." *Environmental Education Research*. Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 189 – 195.

— — — . 1998. "Environment Literacy: functional, cultural, critical. The case of the SCAA guidelines." *Environmental Education Research*. Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 155 – 164.

— — — . 2001. "Who Drew the Sky? Conflicting Assumptions in Environmental Education." *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 245 – 256.

Stables, A.W.G. and K.N. Bishop. 2001. "Weak & Strong Conceptions of Environmental Literacy: implications for environmental education." *Environmental Education Research*. Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 89 – 97.

Stables, A.W.G. and W.A.H. Scott. 1999. "Environmental Education and the Discourses of Humanist Modernity: redefining critical environmental literacy." *Educational Philosophy & Theory*. Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 145 – 155.

Thomas, M. 2000. <http://chomsky.arts.adelaide.edu.au/Environmental/research/mthomas/papers/9902/9902>.

UN. 1997. Overall Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of Agenda 21; Report of the 19<sup>th</sup> special session of the General Assembly of the United Nations (A/S-19/21, para 105-106). New York: United Nations.

UNCED. 1992. "Agenda 21." Geneva: United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.

UNCSD. 1996. *UN Commission on Sustainable Development* (4<sup>th</sup> session). New York: United Nations.

Unesco. 1997. *Educating for a Sustainable Future: a transdisciplinary vision for concerted action*. Paris: Unesco.

Unesco-UNEP. 1998. Sustainable Development via Environmental Education; Connect 32: 1 – 3.

Vincent, A. 1998. "Liberalism and the Environment." *Environmental Values*.

Vol. 7, pp. 443 – 459.

WCED. 1987. *Our Common Future; World Commission on Environment and  
Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

WWF(UK). 1999. *Lessons in Life*. Godalming, World-wide Fund for Nature  
(UK).

## Endnotes

1. IUCN/UNEP/WWF 1980; WCED 1987; IUCN/UNEP/WWF 1991; UNCED 1992; UNCSD 1996; UN 1997, A/S-19/21 105 – 106; Unesco 1997; Unesco-UNEP 1998, 1 – 3.
2. Dobson 1996.
3. Pawley 2000.
4. Stables 2001.
5. Scheffler 1960.
6. Jickling and Spork 1998, 313.
7. DfEE/QCA 1999, 11.
8. Knapp 1998; Smyth 1998.
9. Hopkins 1998, p. 169.
10. WWF(UK) 1999.
11. For various commentaries on this, see Gough 1987; Jickling 1992; Payne

1997; Scott and Oulton 1999; Sauvé 1999.

12. Stables 1996; 1998; Stables and Bishop 2001.

13. Foster 2001.

14. Mill 1986, 177.

15. On-line colloquium 1998; Sauvé 1999.

16. Unesco-UNEP 1988.

17. Stables and Scott 1999.

18. Berlin 1969.

19. Berlin 1969; Crick, 1999.

20. Ross 1994, 17.

21. Pepper 1993, 5.

22. Dworkin 2000.

23. DfEE/QCA 1999.

24. Jensen and Schnack 1994; 1997.

25. Lawton 1978. vol. 2.

26. Parekh 1993; 1994.

27. Vincent 1998.

28. Thomas 2000.

29. Enslin 1999.

30. Ayittey 1992.

31. Enslin 1999, 184.

32. Gough 2002.

33. Jensen and Schnack 1997, 165.

34. Enslin 1999.